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ABSTRACT

This study used structured interviews to examine the views of 101 South Australian immigrant families, grouped by country of origin, concerning their educational expectations for their children ages birth to 8 years. The overall research questions were: (1) What are the parental expectations of immigrant groups for the early education of their children? (2) How do these educational expectations differ and are there commonalities across the selected groups? (3) What are early childhood teachers' educational expectations for the children they teach? and (4) What are the areas of congruence or difference between the expectations of parents and teachers? The findings indicated differences between groups and between parents and teachers in the importance placed on early childhood education, preparing the child for school, helping the child's social and emotional growth, helping the child's moral growth, helping the child to care for the environment, and helping the child adjust to school (social aspect). (EV)

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Diversity in Early Childhood Services in Australia

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Professor Marjory Ebbeck

Background

Australia is a diverse country and has a history of multiculturalism that dates back to the post second world war. This immigration has continued. Many immigrant families are faced with a number of problems and issues as they make Australia their new home. The social adaptation and integration of immigrant families are dependent on a number of factors, one being the degree to which family expectations are met in the early childhood and schooling sectors. Pre-school and childcare centres often are very different from those found in the family's country of origin. There has been a tendency on the part of some early childhood professionals to assume that early childhood services in Australia are similar to those offered in other countries (Ebbeck & Glover: 1996). Likewise, there is a tendency by professionals to assume that immigrant families have similar views as to the kind of early education that is suitable for their children. In this respect it cannot be assumed that immigrants, as a whole, have the same beliefs about child-rearing practices as do the early childhood professionals in Australia.

Immigrant families may come with specific philosophies and expectations when they place their children in school and pre-schools. Whilst most systems of education in Western countries place great importance on the value of play as a mode of learning this is not necessarily true of many Asian countries where parents expect their young children to participate in a formalised curriculum and come home each day with some tangible evidence of facts/knowledge gained and skills developed (Ching, 1993). Many pre-schools and childcare centres in Asian countries have limited space particularly in relation to outside play areas and their curriculum is geared to the localised context in as much as 'indoor' learning is the predominant activity. Pre-school or childcare centres in Australia place great emphasis on outdoor play and this may be puzzling to some immigrant families. Petrick (1992:23) has written that some Cambodian families find it difficult to make provision for play activities in the home as it creates disorder in the crowded accommodation in which they usually live.

Some professionals are poorly informed about the wide variation in child-rearing practices and expectations amongst different cultural groups. Immigrant groups are far from homogenous in the values, beliefs and expectations they have for their children and therefore professionals should avoid forming stereotypic views about the behaviours and beliefs of ethnic groups. Most families, however, are very concerned for the future success of their children even at the early childhood level. Research by Gonzalez-Mena (1991) has shown that there are differences in educational and cultural expectations between parents and early childhood staff working in centres. If educational programs are to support the child and the family then there must be some basic understanding and acceptance by professionals of different child-rearing practices and of the expectations of parents.

The Study

The views were studied of 101 South Australian immigrant families concerning their educational expectations for their children who are in the age range of birth to eight years. The overall research questions were:

- What are the parental expectations of (five) immigrant groups for the early education of their children (0-8 years)?
- How do these educational expectations differ and are there commonalities across the selected groups?
- What are early childhood teachers' educational expectations for the children they teach?
- What are the areas of congruence or difference between the expectations of parents and teachers?

This paper presents the findings of the research in relation to the following questions dealing specifically with the purposes of pre-school education. How can the early childhood centre:

(i) Prepares the child for school - academic learning?
(ii) Helps the child's physical growth?
(iii) Helps the child's social and emotional growth?
(iv) Helps the child to learn?
(v) Helps the child's moral growth?
(vi) Helps the child to care for the environment?
(vii) Helps the child adjust to school - social aspect?

Terms used in the Study

Immigrant families: are families where at least one parent was born overseas and have been resident in Australia for six years or less.

Early childhood teachers: are teachers trained in the field of early childhood with either a diploma or degree in early childhood education.

The Sample

1. The families

Participants in the study came from five ethnic groups and met the following criteria:

- Being immigrant to Australia within the last 6 years
- Having a child in the age group of birth to 8 years
- Country of origin being in the Pan-Pacific Region

The groups were selected on the basis that there were at least 20 families per group who were willing to participate in the study. In total, 101 families participated: Vietnam (22 families), Cambodia (20 families), People's Republic of China (20 families), Indonesia (20 families) and the Philippines (19 families). These families comprised the parent cohort. In all cases except for the Philippines both parents came from the same country. In the case of the Philippines nine of the nineteen spouses were born in Australia. Some families were refugees and were in refugee camps in certain countries prior to arrival in Australia. Of the Vietnamese cohort, over two thirds came to Australia via another country. There were no single parent families in the sample but this was purely a random result as no attempt was made to exclude single families in the study.

2. The teachers

One hundred early childhood teachers currently working with immigrant families in early childhood centres in South Australia formed the second cohort of respondents. They all met the criterion of being early childhood rained with a Diploma or Degree status with the exception of 12 who were primary trained. Of the 100 teachers 88 had specialist early childhood qualifications. Nineteen of the teachers were in the age-range 25 - 34 years, 47 were in the age-range 35 - 44 years, and 22 in the range 45 - 54 years. A small number (4) of teachers were under 25 years of age. In the main, the teacher cohort could be called mature and experienced.

The Method

A series of structured interviews with families was arranged and interviews of one hour duration were conducted either in a home setting or in an early childhood centre if this was the preference of the family. In the interviews prompt phrases were used if the meaning of a certain question seemed unclear to the parent. Parents were asked to rank the seven purposes on a scale as follows: irrelevant, unimportant, of minor importance, important, very important. The rating from irrelevant to very important was discussed in detail and questions about this were covered before the actual study questions were presented. Where the parent felt it necessary, the interview was conducted by an ethnic worker in the parent's native language. This occurred in all groups except for the Philippine women who were fluent in English. Mothers were interviewed but in some cases the fathers were present and it was a joint interview. Family views were sought and no distinction was made as to who answered the question(s).

The same process was used with the teachers although the interviews took less time as the teachers had an understanding of the interview questions.

The Results of the Study

Tables are presented which show frequency distributions with numbers and percentages of each of the five ethnic groups of parents' and teachers' responses to each of the seven purposes of pre-school education (N = 101 parents and 100 teachers). Statistical analyses were conducted to establish the significance of the differences between parents and teachers. Because the numbers of parents were small in each group the parent responses were pooled into the total of 101 and compared against the 100 teachers. Results of the tests showed that there were statistical differences at the 0.05 level on five of the following questions but not in the other two:

(i) Prepare the child for school - academic learning
(iii) Help the child's social and emotional growth
(v) Help the child's moral growth
(vi) Help the child to care for the environment
(vii) Help the child adjust to school - social aspect

There were some strong differences between the parents' and teachers' ranking. Early childhood teachers, from tradition, have rejected the idea that pre-school education is to prepare the child for school. Rightly or wrongly, they have seen their work traditionally as being more related to fostering children's development the 'here and now' rather than being linked as a preparation period for formal schooling which is something to be experienced in the future. Given the Asian backgrounds of these ethnic groups where their own schooling has probably been quite formal, one would expect them to want a strong link to exist between the early childhood centre and its work to that of preparing children for the next stage of their education, namely formal schooling.

Table 1: Prepare for the child for school

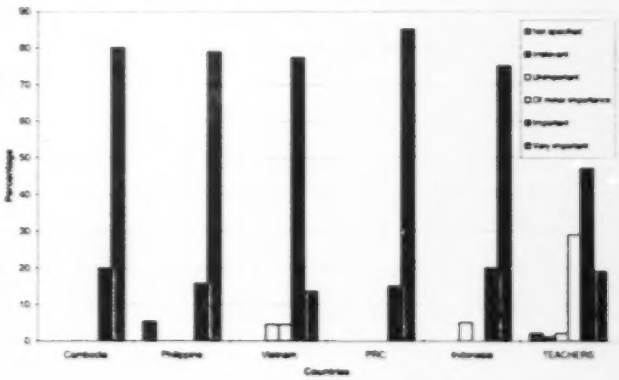


Table 2: Helping the child's physical growth

Responses showed an area of commonality for there was no significant statistical difference in the responses between parents and teachers.

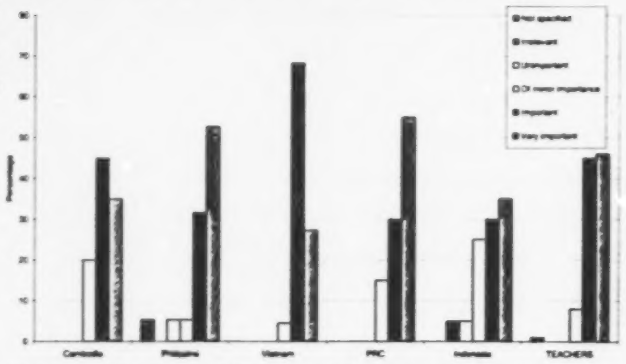


Table 3: Help the child's social and emotional growth

Not surprisingly the teachers ranked this purpose higher than did parents with 91% of the teachers ranking it as very important. With the exception of parents from PRC other parent groups ranked it lower. In relation to this purpose, teachers may need to discuss with parents the importance of social and emotional development especially when children are making an adjustment of one kind or another in their transition to pre-school or school.

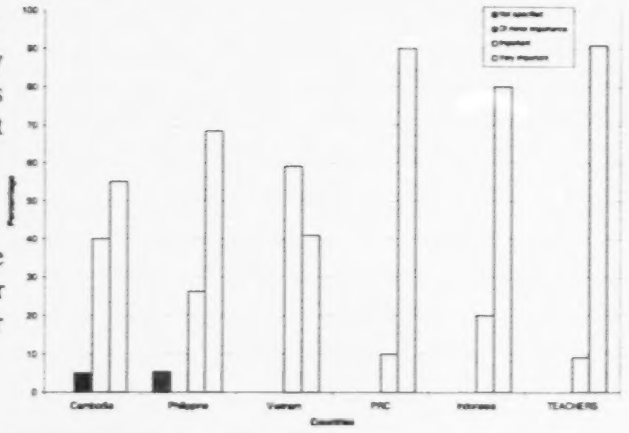


Table 4: Help the child to learn

The responses showed a commonality as both parents and teachers rated this as 'important' or 'very important'.

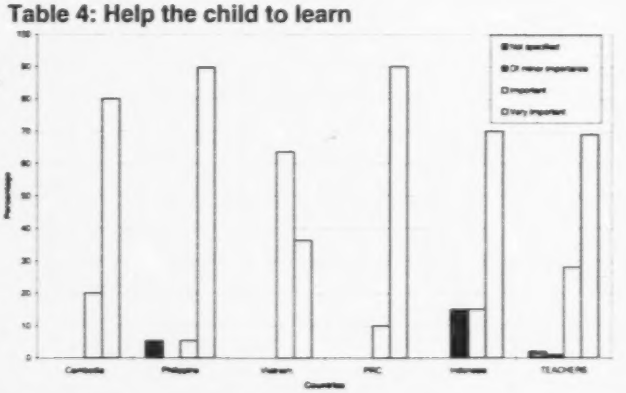


Table 5: Help the child's moral growth

Responses showed statistically significant differences with parents rating this higher than teachers. Given the Confucian ideals of some Asian families where children are encouraged to learn right from wrong early in life and to be obedient, this finding in relation to parents is not surprising. Teachers may need to find out more about the differences in child rearing practices so that they can better understand and appreciate parents' views about this important aspect of children's development.

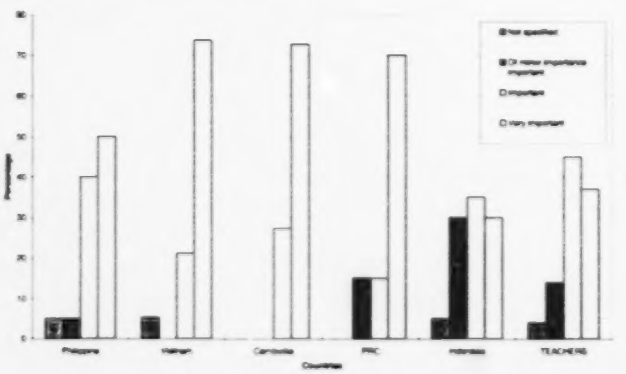
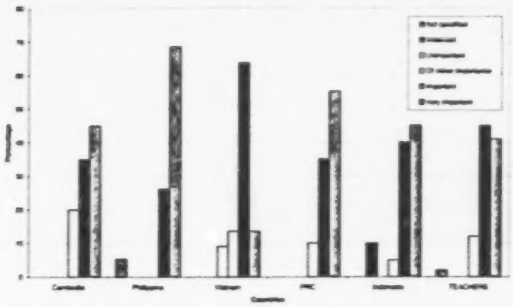
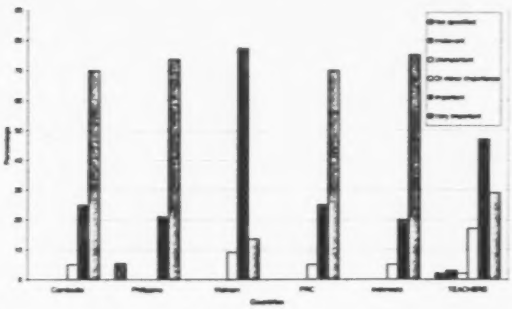


Table 6: Help the child to care for the environment



Responses showed significant statistical differences with teachers rating this purpose higher than parents. This is a very important aspect of the pre-school curriculum and one where teachers may need to communicate more effectively with their parent communities. The question arises as to whether or not the pre-school is too early to begin to develop children's environmental awareness.

Table 7: Help the child adjust to school



Responses showed significant statistical differences. Interestingly parents ranked this more highly overall than did the teachers. This low ranking by teachers is a concern. Strong differences in views between both groups needs further investigation given the importance of this area to the continuing welfare of the child. Transition issues have received prominence in recent years so the response of the teachers is unexpected.

Conclusion

The findings of the study showed more areas of difference than of commonalities. It is suggested that teachers should not view ethnic groups in a stereotypic way for each group showed individual responses to many of the questions. There was a range of responses amongst ethnic groups again highlighting the need to look at families and their children in an objective and individual way. The study also reinforces the need for close communication between parents and professionals for professionals cannot assume that they have the same views as the families with whom they work. If early childhood professionals are to implement culturally relevant curricula they must have an informed understanding about the experiential background of the children they work with. If a goal of early childhood education is to support rather than supplant the home environment then studies such as this are important.

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